

Tips for Releasing

REMEMBER WARM WATER EQUALS MORE STRESS

The prime fishing for many of South Carolina's larger saltwater game fish is during the warmer months, and water temperature plays a critical role in the survival of released fish. Warmer water contains less dissolved oxygen, and fish are under more stress in a warmer water environment. In these conditions the fish should be brought to release as quickly as possible.

KEEP FISH IN THE WATER

Never hold a fish out of the water longer than you can hold your breath—don't even touch the fish if you don't have to. Most fish can be released without ever touching them. However, if you do need to remove a large fish from the water, keep the fish in a horizontal position and support its body weight. Never hold a fish in a vertical position. This can tear internal organs and dislocate the spine.

TAKE TIME TO AERATE

While there is much debate over whether to move the fish back and forth or just hold it gently in the water, the ultimate goal is to get water flowing across the gills



until the fish is able to swim off on its own. If there is current present, hold the fish pointing into the current. If you have a partner and are fishing from a boat, idle slowly forward to create a current flow.

Consider that larger predators (sharks) may be attracted to a distressed fish, and a fish that has not been revived properly can be an easy meal once released.

MINIMIZE HANDLING

If you must handle the fish or take it out of the water, do it as quickly as possible. Fish have a slime coating that is designed to protect them from disease. Always use wet hands or wet gloves to avoid removing this protective layer. Under no circumstance should you ever grab a fish by the eyes or insert your fingers or hand under the gill plate.

Nets or cradles can limit your hands-on contact with the fish. If you do have to land a fish with a net or cradle, nets that are rubber, knotless or fine mesh are less abrasive to the fish's skin and slime coating.

"A good game fish is too valuable to be caught only once." Lee Wulff

PHOTOGRAPHING IN THE WATER

A picture is a great way to preserve the memory of a trophy catch, but removing a large fish from the water in order to do so can be harmful to the fish. Instead, take photos of the angler reviving the fish. This way, the fish remains in the water and the angler is seen close enough to the fish to still document its size. Also, be aware of fishery regulations that may prohibit certain species from being removed from the water.



USE LIP-GRIPPING DEVICES ONLY WHEN NECESSARY

While lip gripping devices can be useful in handling fish with sharp teeth, recent studies have shown that these devices may actually cause injury to a fish's jaw, especially if the fish is thrashing around with the device in place. Avoid using lip gripping devices on anything but the most toothy critters, and never use a lip grip device to lift a fish vertically out of the water.

RECOGNIZE SIGNS OF BAROTRAUMA

Fish that are caught from deep water (generally more than 60 feet) may suffer barotrauma, a condition in which a fish's swim bladder balloons as it is reeled up through the water column. Signs of this condition include distended intestines, bulging eyes, and bloating of the abdomen. In some instances the stomach may be protruding from the mouth. NEVER try to push the stomach back down the fish's throat.

USE DESCENDING DEVICES INSTEAD OF VENTING


A descending device is an effective way to send a fish back down, allowing it to recompress.

Unlike venting, which requires puncturing the fish, most descending devices are attached to a fish's mouth, causing little harm or injury. Pressure activated devices (photo) can be set to release a fish at a specified depth.




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DNR

Fishing for the Future Tips for Successful Catch & Release



Visit: www.saltwaterfishing.sc.gov

BIGGER FISH PRODUCE MORE OFFSPRING

The largest game fish are often the most valuable in terms of their ability to produce offspring. The contribution of one large female fish to the future of a population can exceed the contribution made by many smaller female fish. It is not always possible to identify which large fish are females, so err on the side of conservation and focus on ensuring the healthy release of the fish. After all, we owe it to the resource.



LAND 'EM QUICKLY!

Try to land big fish quickly. Hooking up with a trophy-sized fish can be the experience of a lifetime. Landing the fish quickly is in the best interest of both the angler and the fish. For the angler, the longer the fight ensues, the greater the chance for the fish to become “the one that got away.” For the fish, the reduced fight time can substantially increase the chances for survival after being released. The longer a fish fights, the more toxic lactic acid builds up in their body. As a result, an exhausted fish may initially be able to swim away only to die several days later.

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Tips to reduce the fight time

DON'T GO AFTER ELEPHANTS WITH EQUIPMENT FOR SQUIRRELS

Whether it's “breeder” size red drum, tarpon or cobia, fishing for larger game fish generally requires specific tackle and techniques, which are often different than those used when fishing for smaller fish. Anglers can increase their chances of successfully landing large fish by using tackle that is heavy enough to handle the larger fish they are targeting.

USE THE RIGHT LINE

Use the proper line test strength for the size fish you are targeting. Not only will this have an influence on the fight time by allowing you to land the fish more quickly, but it will reduce the possibility of the fish breaking off and swimming around with a hook and several feet of line trailing behind. Braided line is a good option, allowing the use of lighter gear with the ability to shorten the fight due to line strength and abrasive resistance.

HAVE A PLAN

Consider the size of the fish you are targeting and come up with a strategy beforehand that will give you the best chance of successfully landing and releasing the fish. For example, anglers that are anchored while fishing should be prepared to “unhook” from their anchor in order to chase down a large fish that makes a long run. Going to the fish instead of trying to pull the fish to you can significantly reduce the fight time. Have equipment such as landing devices, pliers or dehooking tools, a camera and gloves ready and close at hand.

Use a rod belt or harness for fighting big fish on heavy tackle. Not only will this prevent bruises created from the rod butt, but it will provide you more leverage to efficiently battle the fish.



Tips on reducing injury to the fish and yourself



Circle Hooks



Non-offset Circle Hook

USE CIRCLE HOOKS

The location of the hook wound is one of the most important factors that influences the survival of a released fish. If you are using bait, either live or dead, always use circle hooks. Unlike the standard “J”-style hooks, circle hooks are designed to roll as a fish takes the bait, thus resulting in the hook becoming lodged in the corner of the mouth as opposed to the gut or throat.

TAKE CARE WHEN REMOVING HOOKS

Never attempt to rip a hook out if it appears a fish has swallowed the hook. If deeply embedded in the throat, pliers or a dehooking tool can make removing the hook considerably easier. If the hook cannot be removed safely, cut the line as close to the hook as possible. Most (non-stainless) hooks will simply rust out after a short time.

MODIFY YOUR HOOKS

File or bend down the barbs. This allows for a much easier and quicker release of your fish, with less damage to the fish's mouth. You will also be thankful for a barbless hook should you accidentally hook yourself.

KEEP THE FISH UNDER CONTROL

Keeping a large fish under control once it has been landed can be a challenge. With species like tarpon, a firm one- or two-handed grip on the jaw, while the fish is in the water, can be an effective way to keep the fish subdued while the hook is removed. Allowing a fish to bang against the side of a boat can cause injury to both the fish and angler. A wet towel placed over the fish's head covering the eyes can also help calm the fish.